



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Semper not fidelis

Citation for published version:

Fuller, M 2019, 'Semper not fidelis', *The Wagner Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The Wagner Journal

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Tannhäuser, Amsterdam 24.iv.19

Tannhäuser. Daniel Kirch (Tannhäuser), Svetlana Aksenova (Elisabeth), Ekaterina Gubanova (Venus), Stephen Milling (Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen), Björn Bürger (Wolfram von Eschenbach), Attilio Glaser (Walther von der Vogelweide), Kay Stieffermann (Biterolf), Lucas van Lierop (Heinrich der Schreiber), Eric Ander (Reinmar von Zweter), Julietta Aleksanyan (Ein junger Hirt), chorus of De Nationale Opera, Nederlands Philharmonisch Orkest/Marc Albrecht; Christof Loy (director, choreography), Johannes Leiacker (sets), Ursula Renzenbrink (costumes), Olaf Winter (lighting), Klaus Bertisch (dramaturg). De Nationale Opera, Amsterdam, 24 April 2019.

Christof Loy's new production of *Tannhäuser* at the Dutch National Opera is the first seen there since Nikolaus Lehnhoff's, in 2007. A single set is used throughout: a hall-cum-dance studio, with bars along the walls. In the rear a large archway gives into a white room from which further doors lead to dressing rooms. (In Act II a red curtain covers this archway for the song contest.) A piano centre-stage features in all three Acts. At the opening of the Act I prelude Tannhäuser sits at it, immersed in composition. Taking its cue from the troubled history of the 1861 Paris staging of this work, ballet dancers recalling the paintings of Degas spill onto the stage during the bacchanal, along with Venus as the *maîtresse de ballet*, and a number of beaux in evening dress (some of whom, it later emerges, are Tannhäuser's knightly friends). Dancers throw themselves (and are thrown) at one another, in the course of which exercise many shed all or part of their clothing – although this choreography is carried out with more brisk efficiency than eroticism. The stage clears for the duet between Tannhäuser and Venus. At Tannhäuser's evocation of Maria the shepherd

appears, dressed as a maid, bearing a portrait of the Virgin which she hangs on the wall: after the appearance of the knights she remains in attendance to the end of the act.

In Act II Loy begins a more detailed exploration of the relationships between the protagonists. Prompted by Wolfram's comment about his own love for Elisabeth, the production makes his affection abundantly clear: he misses no opportunity to hold or caress her, and is clearly pained when she embraces Tannhäuser at the end of their duet. The chorus, all in evening dress, observe the song contest (which omits Walther's contribution) with mounting horror: Biterolf has to be restrained from menacing Tannhäuser with a sword. Finally Wolfram urges Tannhäuser to depart for Rome with the pilgrims.

At the beginning of Act three the stage is completely bare. Ballerinas rehearse their steps, observed by Venus and Walther, and Elisabeth appears, clasping the portrait of the virgin. At the end of the pilgrims' chorus Elisabeth is in despair, whilst Wolfram's emotions encompass both concern for her and delight at the non-return of Tannhäuser. At the conclusion of 'Allmächt'ge Jungfrau' Elisabeth swoons, and Venus covers her with her white cloak. Wolfram's 'Abendstern' is sung to Venus (which at least makes semantic, if not dramatic, sense): at its conclusion Elisabeth rises with an ecstatic expression and she and Venus leave the stage. At the conclusion of the Rome narration Venus, the ballerinas and their beaux return: Elisabeth's body is brought on: Wolfram makes advances to Venus; and as the opera concludes Tannhäuser stands on the piano holding a bouquet of roses (an echo, perhaps, of the Pope's flowering staff), despairingly casting them to the ground one by one.

Stephen Milling brought gravity and authority to the role of the Landgrave, and Ekaterina Gubanova was a smoothly-sung Venus, her matronly appearance chiming well with the role she embodies in this production. Svetlana Aksanova as Elisabeth was a little pinched at the top during 'Dich, teure Halle', but gave a limpid prayer to the Virgin in act 3. Daniel Kirch's Tannhäuser had the power and stamina for the role, but too often resorted to shouting

in the interests of expressiveness. Wolfram, whose role is central in this production, was portrayed with subtly and nuance by Björn Bürger: his is a light but pleasing baritone, and he caught well the mixed emotions and mixed affections of this character in Loy's interpretation.

All the singers were offered exemplary support by Marc Albrecht, who produced a beautifully-blended carpet of sound under his soloists. This was at times a stately reading, especially in the first act, but Albrecht sustained the momentum beneath the slower passages. The chorus similarly produced a pleasingly homogeneous sound, and were very well controlled in their off-stage passages.

This may not have been the most visually alluring production of *Tannhäuser*, but Loy's attention to detail in his working out of the relationships between the four main characters, the quirky twists given to those relationships, and in particular his foregrounding of Wolfram, made for a thought-provoking evening.